



# Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of a failure, 2008–2018

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ARTICLE



## Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of a failure, 2008–2018

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### ABSTRACT

Over a decade of security force assistance (SFA) initiatives to build an effective Somali National Army (SNA) failed because of the interrelated effects of political, contextual and operational challenges. The key political challenges were interest asymmetry between international actors and Somali elites, insufficient focus on institution-building and a lack of donor coordination. The principal contextual challenges in Somalia were the legacies of two decades of state collapse and the negative effects of clan dynamics. The main operational challenges were building an army while simultaneously fighting a war, the complexities of military integration, and the severe capability gaps afflicting the SNA.

**KEYWORDS** Security force assistance (SFA); security sector reform (SSR); Somalia; African Union; al-Shabaab

### Introduction

In December 2017, Somali government officials delivered the results of an Operational Readiness Assessment of the Somali National Army (SNA) to a conference of international partners.<sup>1</sup> The assessment was needed because neither the government nor its partners had reliable basic information about the army, including the identities of SNA personnel, their locations and unit affiliations, or their weapons and equipment. The assessment confirmed the SNA was in a dire state.<sup>2</sup> There were fewer frontline personnel than previously estimated (on average battalions had only 63% of their authorised strength), there were inconsistent recruiting standards (for both officers and rank-and-file troops), and most battalions lacked basic

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<sup>1</sup>In May 2017, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) recognised the value of conducting ‘a Joint Verification exercise’ of its armed forces. SNA presentation to AMISOM Joint Review team, Mogadishu, 23 May 2017. Following discussions with its international partners, the FGS agreed to conduct a comprehensive verification of the SNA and Somali Police Force across all sectors of operations as part of AMISOM’s exit strategy. AU document PSC/PR/COM.(DCC), 12 July 2017, §15. This exercise was subsequently renamed the Operational Readiness Assessment, which began in September.

<sup>2</sup>*Operational Readiness Assessment – Final Report* (Somali Ministry of Defense 1 December 2017).

equipment, including weapons, ammunition, communications kit and vehicles. The result was an army in name only, largely confined to defensive and localised operations, unable to undertake a coherent national campaign, and often reliant on the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and United Nations (UN) for protection, securing its main supply routes, logistics support and casualty evacuation.

The embarrassing reality was that after a decade of receiving security force assistance (SFA)<sup>3</sup> from over a dozen<sup>4</sup> international actors, only one SNA unit was able to conduct sustained offensive operations; an advanced infantry battalion known as *Danab* ('lightning') which was trained, equipped and mentored by the United States and kept largely separate from the rest of the army.<sup>5</sup> This wasn't for a lack of trying. For example, part of AMISOM's original mandate in 2007 was to assist with 'the effective re-establishment and training of all-inclusive Somali security forces,' some of which occurred in Uganda.<sup>6</sup> To give some examples of the types and scale of SFA to the SNA, outside of AMISOM, by late 2008 Ethiopia had reportedly trained 17,000 Somali security forces<sup>7</sup>; since 2010, the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) trained about 5700 SNA, at a cost of approximately €90 million<sup>8</sup>; from November 2013 the UN Support Office for AMISOM (UNSOA) provided logistical support for up to 10,900 SNA troops engaged in joint operations with AMISOM<sup>9</sup>; the UAE deployed about 200 advisers in Somalia and trained a brigade of soldiers in Mogadishu as well as providing additional stipends to others; since 2009, the US State Department and Pentagon both obligated SFA monies to the SNA, including for tactical engagement for military operations, logistics, medical support and communications capabilities, and institutional reform including civilian control of the military<sup>10</sup>; between 2010 and 2013, Italy paid stipends for approximately 3300 SNA troops<sup>11</sup>; since 2012, the UK deployed a mission support team of

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<sup>3</sup>The United States military defines SFA as 'unified action to generate, employ, and sustain local, host nation or regional security forces in support of a legitimate authority'. US, *Commander's Handbook for Security Force Assistance* (Kansas: Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance 14 July 2008), 1.

<sup>4</sup>The providers of SFA to the SNA since 2008 include Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Italy, Kenya, Sudan, Turkey, the UAE, Uganda, the United Kingdom, the United States, as well as the African Union (AU), European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN).

<sup>5</sup>The name came from a commando battalion used by the SNA before the civil war of the late 1980s.

<sup>6</sup>S/RES/1744, 20 February 2007, §4.

<sup>7</sup>*Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1811 (2008)* (S/2008/769, 10 December 2008), §19.

<sup>8</sup>EUTM website, <https://www.eutm-somalia.eu>.

<sup>9</sup>S/RES/2124, 12 November 2013.

<sup>10</sup>Between 2010 and May 2017, the US obligated approximately \$66 million for SNA stipend-related activities. Inspection of the Bureau of African Affairs' Foreign Assistance Program Management (US Office of Inspections, ISP-I-18-02, October 2017), 11.

<sup>11</sup>*Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1853 (2008)* (S/2010/91, 10 March 2010), §191 and Colin Robinson, 'Revisiting the rise and fall of the Somali Armed Forces, 1960–2012', *Defense & Security Analysis* 32/3 (2016), 249.

about 70 troops to strengthen the SNA and Somali Ministry of Defence<sup>12</sup>; and from 2015 to 2017, Turkey spent some \$50 million building new training facilities for the SNA in Mogadishu, provided direct budget support to the Federal Government, some of which was reportedly used to pay salaries, and deployed approximately 200 of its own troops to train an SNA battalion each year.<sup>13</sup>

This article argues that the collective failure of these initiatives stemmed from the interrelated negative effects of political, contextual and operational challenges in Somalia. The key political challenges were interest asymmetry between international actors and local Somali elites, insufficient focus on institution-building, and a lack of donor coordination. The principal contextual challenges in Somalia were the legacies of two decades of state collapse and the negative effects of clan dynamics. Finally, the main operational challenges involved building an army while simultaneously fighting a war, the complexities of military integration, and the huge capability gaps afflicting the SNA.

To substantiate this argument, the article begins by summarising the evolution of Somalia's armed forces since the country's independence, focusing on the period since 2008 when the basis of today's SNA was established. Since then, the Somali armed forces have remained fragmented and their institutions and structures largely dysfunctional. The three subsequent sections then analyse the main political, contextual and operational challenges that prevented international partners from building an effective SNA. The conclusion reflects on the relationship between these different problems and briefly proposes some alternative options. Evidence is drawn from interviews with relevant experts as well as previously unpublished material about the state of the SNA gathered from the Somali government and its international partners.

## The evolution of the Somali armed forces

By the late 2000s, there were two principal reasons to build an effective Somali army. First, it was considered a vital part of resurrecting a functioning Somali state that could stabilise the country and protect its citizens, first and foremost from one of the world's deadliest militant groups, Harakat al-Shabaab.<sup>14</sup> Second, it became a crucial part of a viable exit strategy for AMISOM.<sup>15</sup> This international project generated a long list of aspirational adjectives to make the

<sup>12</sup>For details of the UK's support see Jon Lunn, *Somalia: February 2017 Update* (House of Commons Briefing Paper No.7298, 16 February 2017).

<sup>13</sup>See Robinson, 'Revisiting', 247 and Menekse Tokyay, 'Turkish military base in Somalia', *Arab News*, 17 August 2017, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1145846/middle-east>.

<sup>14</sup>Although debate continues over whether Somaliland will reunify with the rest of Somalia, this article focuses on developments in south-central Somalia and to a lesser extent the autonomous region of Puntland.

<sup>15</sup>Paul D. Williams with Abdirashid Hashi, *Exit Strategy Challenges for the AU Mission in Somalia* (Mogadishu: HIPS, February 2016).

new SNA legitimate, inclusive, cohesive, professional, sustainable, and effective. Following the London Security Pact agreed in May 2017, official communications from the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and its international partners settled on the alliterative language of building security forces that were affordable, acceptable, accountable, and able to protect the Somali population.<sup>16</sup> Part of the reason why building this new SNA proved so difficult was the complicated evolution of its previous iterations.

While Somalia established a police force in 1943, its Armed Forces were not formed until April 1960 by the merger of the Italian and British mandates' mobile security forces. Initially, these numbered between 2000 and 5000 - personnel.<sup>17</sup> For most of the next two decades, the Armed Forces focused on pursuing an irredentist agenda designed to unite the Somali populations spread across the wider Horn of Africa. Ultimately, this led to the decision to invade Ethiopia in 1977, resulting in Somalia's defeat within less than a year. During the 1980s, the Armed Forces became increasingly politicised and its officer corps distorted by President Siad Barre's promotion of officers from his preferred clans, mainly Marehan and related Darod. By the time Somalia's civil war got underway in 1987, the Armed Forces had effectively started disintegrating as Barre lost control of large parts of the country.<sup>18</sup>

The Somali army subsequently ceased to exist until the new transitional Somali authorities tried to resurrect it between 2000 and 2005. The first effort was made in Djibouti with the establishment of the Transitional National Government (TNG) in 2000, which recruited freelance gunmen and members of Siad Barre's military.<sup>19</sup> Some of these carried over to 2004 when the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was formed in Kenya and then moved its military to the Somali town of Jowhar. They comprised of some troops from Barre's military but also militias from Puntland and other clans from the Jowhar area. When the TFG moved to Baidoa in 2005 it also recruited some clan militias from the Bay region.<sup>20</sup>

On paper at least, the SNA was part of the Somali National Security and Stabilization Plan (NSSP), which the TFG adopted in June 2006.<sup>21</sup> The NSSP was intended 'to serve as the main conduit for supporting collaboration between the TFG and its international partners for sustained, coherent, harmonized and complimentary security sector stabilization in Somalia.'<sup>22</sup> It was subsequently

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<sup>16</sup>Communique of the London Conference on Somalia, 11 May 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/london-somalia-conference-2017-communique> .

<sup>17</sup>Robinson, 'Revisiting', 239.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>19</sup>Mohamed Mubarak, 'Somali Military has more Problems than Lack of Guns', *African Arguments*, 28 February 2014, <http://africanarguments.org/2014/02/26/somali-military-has-more-problems-than-lack-of-guns-by-mohamed-mubarak/> .

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>*Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the Situation in Somalia* (AU document PSC/PR/2(LXIX) 19 January 2007), §33.

<sup>22</sup>Cited in the President's Foreword to the 2011 Somali NSSP.

revised several times because it was originally intended to serve as guidance during the transitional governance period. Revisions were developed in light of recommendations made by two security sector assessments conducted during 2009 and 2011.<sup>23</sup> Rather ominously, the 2009 assessment concluded that: 'Security Sector Reform (SSR) efforts will probably falter – and quite possibly even fail – without a broader political foundation that promotes good governance, transparency and accountability within the Transitional timeframe.'<sup>24</sup>

The basis of today's SNA, however, lay in the formation of a new Joint Security Force in 2008. This comprised of security forces from both the TFG and the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS)-Djibouti faction as stipulated in the Djibouti Agreement of August 2008. This joint force probably numbered just over 5,000 troops; about 3,000 from the TFG and about 2,000 from the ARS-Djibouti, who were mostly militia from the Islamic Courts that seized Mogadishu from the ruling warlords in mid-2006. It was to be given UN support to build their capacity to restore the security sector and the rule of law.<sup>25</sup>

Since then, it proved very difficult to ascertain the precise number of personnel in the SNA. In January 2009, for instance, AMISOM's Force Commander noted that both the TFG and ARS had submitted lists of names of soldiers to AMISOM to be placed into the Joint Security Force but his troops had to scrutinise the lists of names 'one by one' to verify each individual's information and then issue them an ID card. Seven months into the process, AMISOM had issued only approximately 800 ID cards.<sup>26</sup> It was also difficult to distinguish genuine 'fighters' from other 'freelancers' who were, as the UN Monitoring Group put it, "on call" to varying degrees if required though always ready to collect salary and stipend payments when available.<sup>27</sup> Table 1 provides various estimates of the SNA's strength from 1963 to 2017.

By early 2009, the Joint Security Force held about half of Mogadishu's 16 districts. Arguably its most functional unit was the TFG's 867-strong presidential guard, based at the presidential compounds in Mogadishu and Baidoa.<sup>28</sup> The President also controlled the Darwish; traditionally a composite force carrying out military and police functions that generally operated independent from the SNA and answered directly to the President.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup>The 2009 assessment was compiled outside of Somalia, largely donor-led and based on interviews with key actors. It was limited to south-central Somalia for political reasons and was stimulated by donor concerns about the TFG forces. The 2011 assessment was carried out in Somalia and was more Somali-driven and linked to the idea of developing a revised NSSP. Author's communication, contractor engaged in the process, 31 July 2012.

<sup>24</sup>*Somalia Security Sector Assessment* (AU, US, EU, TFG, World Bank and UN: 1 January 2010), §1i.

<sup>25</sup>'Letter from the Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council' (S/2008/804, 19 December 2008), Annex.

<sup>26</sup>Wikileaks Cable, 09ADDISABABA717, 25 March 2009, §8.

<sup>27</sup>*Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2244 (2015)* (S/2016/919, 31 October 2016), Annex 2.1 §3.

<sup>28</sup>Robinson, 'Revisiting', 243.

<sup>29</sup>*Somalia Security Sector Assessment* (January 2010), §16a9b12b.

**Table 1.** Estimated size of the Somali armed forces, 1963–2017.

Date	Estimated Size	Source
1963	4000	
1965	4600	
1970	12,000	
1977	35,000–37,000	
May 2009	5000–6700	TFG and ARS-Djibouti
November 2009	6400 (+ 6270 aligned forces)	UN Monitoring Group
November 2010	8000	AMISOM (CONOPS)
May 2011	10,106	TFG Security Officials
November 2011	10,299	AMISOM
February 2012	11,200	AMISOM (CONOPS)
September 2013	20,000 (inc. aligned militia)	UN Secretary-General
October 2013	12,000	Roger Carstens (contractor)
January 2014	22,714	FGS and UN
January 2017	19,440	UN and World Bank
March 2017	24,684	FGS and UK
March 2017	Around 20,000 (inc. aligned militia)	AU-UN Information Support Team
May 2017	24,820 (+4,569 benefit recipients)	FGS

Source: Paul D. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A history and analysis of the African Union Mission, 2007–2017* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 242.

In June 2009, the TFG signed a cooperation agreement with the Ethiopian-backed Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a (ASWJ) whereby the TFG would provide them with military and logistical support and consult it on administrative issues in areas under its control. The ASWJ reportedly had about 10,000–12,000 fighters, including 3,000 in Mogadishu.<sup>30</sup>

In November 2009, the UN Monitoring Group estimated there were 2,900 effective TFG armed forces, with roughly 3,500 additional troops unvetted, untrained and unregistered.<sup>31</sup> An additional 6,270 government-aligned troops were estimated to exist, mostly clan militia and old, so-called 'grey' soldiers—would-be pensioners who retained their uniforms from the Siad Barre era.<sup>32</sup>

By May 2011, a second security sector assessment estimated there were now 10,106 personnel in the SNA, excluding friendly militias such as ASWJ.<sup>33</sup> It also noted high levels of nepotism, corruption and poor record-keeping and emphasised the urgent need for a biometric identification system across the entire Somali security sector. Rather optimistically, in August 2011, the UN Secretary-General concluded 'the biometric identification system initiated in January should cover the entire National Security Force in Mogadishu by October.'<sup>34</sup> It was still incomplete in late 2018.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, §16a15.

<sup>31</sup>SEMG Report, 10 March 2010, §17.

<sup>32</sup>*Somalia Security Sector Assessment* (January 2010), §16a9a.

<sup>33</sup>*Security Sector Assessment* (June 2011), 5.

<sup>34</sup>*Report of the Secretary-General on Somalia* (UN document S/2011/549, 30 August 2011), §69.

By the end of 2011, AMISOM estimated that there were about 10,300 SNA troops organised into five brigades, with an additional 10,000 fighters in various aligned militia. The AU concluded they were 'a fragmented disparate group' whose 'strong prevalence of clan identity ... is the stumbling block to all efforts in organizing a national military force.'<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the AU observed that some of 'those who defect from Al Shabab are absorbed into the TFG without undergoing serious scrutiny and rehabilitation.'<sup>36</sup> A few months later, AMISOM estimated there were 11,200 SNA operating in Mogadishu and another 11,000 (including ASWJ) engaged in operations against al-Shabaab elsewhere. 'None of these forces,' AMISOM concluded, 'have the ability to support and sustain themselves logistically.'<sup>37</sup>

In November 2013, the UN Support Office for AMISOM (UNSOA) was tasked with providing non-lethal support to 10,900 SNA personnel engaged in joint operations with AMISOM.<sup>38</sup> Consisting of food, water, fuel, transport, tents, and in-theatre medical evacuation, this support was funded by the UN Trust Fund for AMISOM and the Somali National Army, not the UN's assessed peacekeeping contributions (like most of UNSOA's activities). UNSOA's support to the SNA was supposed to conform to the UN's Human Rights Due Diligence Policy for supporting non-UN security forces but there were huge obstacles to verifying compliance.

By mid-2014, a sixth SNA brigade had been established.<sup>39</sup> As more attention focused on supporting the SNA to coordinate operations with AMISOM, international partners and the Federal Government developed the *Guulwade* ('victory' plan).<sup>40</sup> Launched in March 2015, this was intended to revamp the SNA with international support but also provide some structure for the roughly 10,000 SNA members that were not part of the UNSOA support package. The *Guulwade* plan recognised that the SNA was little more than a collection of clan militias without a functioning, centralised command and control structure. It argued that in order to fight effectively the SNA needed better equipment, infrastructure, organisation, and morale. In the short-term, it also badly needed increased mobility and firepower to conduct effective operations. In essence therefore, the new 'plan' was actually a list of capability gaps that the SNA wanted to fill, with rough calculations of how much it would take to do it. The estimated costs were just under \$85 million for equipment, vehicles, small arms and light weapons, training centres, medical facilities and barracks but excluding operations and maintenance costs.<sup>41</sup> This figure is notable for being well under half the amount the

<sup>35</sup>Report on TFG Military Forces (November 2011) (AU internal document, November 2011), 1.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, 7.

<sup>37</sup>Military Strategic CONOPS (February 2012), §15.

<sup>38</sup>See Paul D. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007–2017* (Oxford UP, 2018) Ch.8.

<sup>39</sup>See UNSOM, *The Somali National Army* (UNSOM briefing Version 1.06, 31 January 2015).

<sup>40</sup>In June, the Federal Government launched its *Heegan* ('readiness') plan for the police force.

<sup>41</sup>*Guulwade (Victory) Plan* (SNA internal document, 9 April 2015), 9.



United States alone gave to Somalia in SFA during 2015/16.<sup>42</sup> Some critics of the plan pointed to the clan composition of the 10,900 SNA, which was dominated by one of the Hawiye sub-clans, in large part because it drew most of its recruits from Hawiye-dominated areas around the Banadir region. Critics suspected Hawiye leaders pushed the plan for precisely this reason.<sup>43</sup> There were also complaints from within the Somali government that some international partners pushed for the plan to focus too narrowly on the SNA troops that would be supported by UNSOA rather than the entire force.<sup>44</sup>

Table 2 shows the distribution of the designated 10,900 SNA that would receive UNSOA support. It was particularly notable that any SNA in Sector 2 would be subject to consultation with the Interim Jubba Administration largely because its leader, Ahmed Madobe, had come to power through the Ras Kamboni militia and used them as his principal security force.

By the time of the 2017 London conference on Somalia—the principal meeting of more than 40 of Somalia’s key international partners—the SNA was estimated at approximately 2100 officers, 18,700 soldiers and NCOs, as well as nearly 3900 orphans, disabled and retirees.<sup>45</sup> It was organised into 12 brigades, over 30 battalions, and had various special units including the presidential guard, military police, the *Danab* advanced infantry, and the health unit. However, as noted at the start of this article, the Operational Readiness Assessment in late 2017 revealed that most SNA battalions were operating at only about two-thirds of their official strength. In December 2017, the World Bank estimated that recurrent annual costs to implement Somalia’s new national security architecture would cost approximately \$140 million.<sup>46</sup>

As the only fully functioning unit of the SNA, it is worth briefly summarising *Danab*’s origins in order to highlight why it remained the exception.

**Table 2.** Distribution of 10,900 SNA conducting joint operations with AMISOM (2015).

<i>Region</i>	<i>AMISOM Sector</i>	<i>Human Rights Trained (as at 9 April)</i>	<i>Guulwade Plan</i>	<i>Human Rights Training Required</i>
Banadir, Lower/Middle Shabelle	1 & 5	3139	3000	0
Bay, Bakool, Gedo	3	3495	2570	0
Hiraan, Galgaduud	4	2137	2000	0
Middle/Lower Jubba, Gedo	2/Kismayo	0	2880	2880
<i>Danab</i> Battalion	Baledogle	300	450	150
<i>Totals</i>		8771	10,900	3030

Source: *Guulwade (Victory) Plan* (SNA internal document, 9 April 2015), 1.

<sup>42</sup>Communication, US official, 10 January 2018.

<sup>43</sup>Communication, UN official, 1 September 2017.

<sup>44</sup>Interview, Somali government official, Djibouti, 27 February 2016.

<sup>45</sup>*Securing Payroll: Somali National Army* (FGS and DFID, unpublished document, March 2017), 6.

<sup>46</sup>World Bank, ‘Summary Update: Security Public Expenditure Review, Somalia Comprehensive Approach to Security Conference, Mogadishu, December 2017’, unpublished document, 1.

After AMISOM expanded beyond Mogadishu in late 2011 it needed a credible Somali partner force that was disciplined and could assuage international concerns about accountability and discipline.<sup>47</sup> The United States therefore supported a private firm that had been working in Somalia with AMISOM since 2008, Bancroft Global Development, to pilot a special SNA advanced infantry platoon as proof of concept for what would become the *Danab* battalion. Once this was viewed as an operational success, during 2013 the Somali government and the United States supported its expansion to a company and then battalion with Bancroft providing training and mentoring, logistics coming via other US contractors, and salary payments made through PricewaterhouseCoopers, which was contracted to support the TFG to handle important financial matters. By July 2014, the first *Danab* company was fully operational and moved to its base in Baledogle, north of Mogadishu. The following month it deployed during AMISOM's Operation Indian Ocean (August–October 2014), which was intended to clear and then hold about a dozen selected al-Shabaab strongholds across south-central Somalia. During 2015, the *Danab* battalion took shape, including the command and support elements. By recruiting personnel on the basis of merit from across all south-central Somalia's regions and clans, paying them consistently, and providing operational mentoring, the *Danab* units represented an important symbol of what military professionalism in Somalia could look like. Importantly, *Danab* forces were kept largely separate from the rest of the SNA, which remained well short of such standards.

## Anatomy of failure

External efforts to build an effective SNA were frustrated by three interrelated types of challenges: political, contextual and operational. The next sections analyse the main problems in each area and how they prevented the development of an effective SNA.

## Political challenges

The key political obstacles were interest asymmetry between international actors and local Somali elites; insufficient focus on institution-building; and a lack of coordination among Somalia's international partners.

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<sup>47</sup>This analysis is based on *Danab Battalion Update* (Bancroft Global Development briefing, November 2014) and author's confidential interviews.

### Interest asymmetry

Interest asymmetry among the providers of SFA and the host state authorities has been identified as one of the general problems with this enterprise and often results in a relatively small pay-off.<sup>48</sup> In Somalia, the asymmetry was over the need to achieve national unity, build professional security forces, and prioritise the fight against al-Shabaab. It produced a misalignment of political interests between external SFA providers—who saw the defeat of al-Shabaab and the resurrection of a unified Somali state as their principal objectives—and the various Somali federal and regional authorities—who did not always share these priorities. As William Reno recently put it, ironically, ‘state officials who play critical roles in security assistance programs ... are [also] deeply implicated in the activities and behaviour that security assistance is meant to change.’<sup>49</sup> The root of this asymmetry stemmed from Somalia’s fragmented national politics, characterised by mistrust and disunity between the federal and emerging regional authorities across the country. This reflected the lack of reconciliation among Somalia’s numerous conflicting parties since the civil war (1988–91) and the country’s subsequent dysfunctional political system wherein elites often had significant incentives to retain the status quo because they benefitted politically and/or economically from the country’s state of insecurity.

Although both the Somali Transitional Federal Governments (2004–09 and 2009–12) and two Federal Governments (2012–17 and 2017–present) wanted to resurrect a federal state in Somalia, they found themselves in a complicated relationship with al-Shabaab, which retained political connections in key posts in the security sector and was therefore able to infiltrate Somali security forces. Furthermore, because the Interim Regional Administrations (IRAs) that emerged across south-central Somalia from mid-2013 did not always share the goal of creating a strong federal government in Mogadishu they did not always act to defeat al-Shabaab as their principal threat. Instead, they often become preoccupied with more localised and clan-based power struggles (see below).<sup>50</sup> The most recent manifestation of this dynamic has been the so-called Gulf Crisis, where several IRAs and members of parliament have willingly accepted bribes from the UAE to undermine Somalia’s President.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup>See, for example, Stephen Biddle, ‘Building Security Forces and Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency’, *Daedalus* 146/4 (2017), 126–138; and Stephen Biddle, Julia McDonald, Ryan Baker, ‘Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance,’ *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41/1–2 (2018), 89–142.

<sup>49</sup>William Reno, ‘The Politics of Security Assistance in the Horn of Africa,’ *Defence Studies* 18/4 (2018), 499.

<sup>50</sup>This will be an ongoing issue as international partners decide how much SFA to give directly to regional forces instead of the SNA.

<sup>51</sup>International Crisis Group, *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis* (Report No.260/Africa, 5 June 2018).

In sum, the interests of Somalia's key political leaders were not conducive to building a set of professional *national* security services focused on defeating al-Shabaab. Crucially, these alternative priorities also left Somali elites unwilling to crackdown on corruption, which massively undermined the project to build an effective SNA.

In 2017, for example, Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Somalia as the world's most corrupt country *for the eleventh year in a row*.<sup>52</sup> Corruption amongst senior commanders and Somali political elites was another major challenge to building an effective SNA, not least because the lack of de facto loyalty to the federal government of most rank-and-file troops meant that their allegiance had to be bought. As one US official put it back in June 2009, the TFG had 'constantly to purchase loyalty to motivate militias to fight in its defense.'<sup>53</sup> But chronic corruption among Somali politicians meant that much of the money ostensibly earmarked for the SNA was stolen.

This corruption came in two main varieties: by elites and rank-and-file soldiers. Elite corruption involved relatively wealthy and politically powerful individuals stealing large sums of money and working to oppose strong, government-led rule of law and a professional security sector in order to further their narrow economic interests. In July 2012, for instance, the UN Monitoring Group identified 'pervasive corruption within the transitional federal institutions.' The group concluded that 'the systematic misappropriation, embezzlement and outright theft of public resources have essentially become a system of governance, embodied in the popular Somali phrase "Maxaa igu jiraa?" ("What's in it for me?").'<sup>54</sup> It estimated that \$7 out of every \$10 received by the TFG in 2009 and 2010 never made it into government coffers and remained unaccounted for.

At the other end of the political pyramid, SNA soldiers were asked to risk their lives often without receiving meagre salaries, equipment and rations, or medical care (see below).<sup>55</sup> This encouraged troops to find alternative sources of income and support, including extorting money or food from alternative sources, taking multiple jobs in the private sector, obtaining two or more identification cards to draw multiple salaries, or selling their

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<sup>52</sup>Details of the Index are at [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org).

<sup>53</sup>Wikileaks Cable 09ADDISABABA1409, 26 June 2009, §4 and §6.

<sup>54</sup>*Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2002 (2011) (S/2012/544, 13 July 2012) 7.*

<sup>55</sup>Since the new FGS was established in September 2012, SNA troops were supposed to receive a monthly wage of \$260 (\$100 from the government, \$60 for rations, and \$100 from a donor). Due to financing constraints, by 2016, the average SNA soldier was scheduled to receive: \$50 salary from the Federal Government, \$60 for food rations (\$30 to be received in cash, \$30 to be received in-kind), and \$100 donor financed stipend per month for the average soldier. Between 2013 and 2016, over 80% of SNA expenditures went on wages and rations (with the remainder going on operations). Author's confidential interview, March 2017. See also UNSOM and World Bank, *Somalia Security and Justice Public Expenditure Review* (UNSOM and World Bank, January 2017) xii, 24 and 59.

equipment. During the TFG years, it was not uncommon for soldiers to sell some of their limited ammunition to buy food and *khat*, and then abscond when they had used the rest.<sup>56</sup> This was corruption but of a qualitatively different kind and left SNA troops with little incentive to fight. As the Mayor of Mogadishu had quipped in 2009, he had 6000–7000 TFG soldiers on payday but only 2000–3000 when it was time to fight.<sup>57</sup> These forms of corruption also turned elements of the local population against the SNA and left the troops vulnerable to exploitation.

AMISOM was so concerned about the potential for the TFG troops to sell their equipment and the weak or non-existent accountability mechanisms that the mission concluded the TFG should not be permitted to stockpile internationally provided military supplies, such as fuel and ammunition.<sup>58</sup> AMISOM also decided to oversee ‘the storage and dispensation’ of the TFG’s arms and ammunition and rations ‘in order to stem the Government corruption that had surfaced in previous years.’<sup>59</sup> This led TFG commanders to complain that they were being undermined by AMISOM’s unwillingness to provide them with sufficient ammunition.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, AMISOM was unable to prevent ammunition leaking ‘from the custody of Government and militia commanders to the illicit market.’<sup>61</sup> By 2011, the UN Monitoring Group thought TFG and aligned forces sold between one-third and one-half of their ammunition.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, opportunities for both elite and rank-and-file corruption were increased because salary payments to the SNA were usually made in cash. This eventually prompted donors to demand that the Somali government use a PricewaterhouseCoopers mechanism to disburse funds using the mobile phone network; once the soldier’s identity and bank details were verified. The problem here was political not technical since Somalis regularly use such systems for all sorts of financial interactions. Specifically, electronic payment systems were hampered by SNA commanders who would lose their cut if they could no longer directly disburse cash payments to the troops. Today, the systems and controls in place to oversee the payment process remain extremely weak, which encourages leakage.<sup>63</sup> In late 2017, a pilot program was tested on the SNA battalion that guards Villa Somalia but it has yet to spread to the rest of the army.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>*Security Sector Assessment* (June 2011) 26.

<sup>57</sup>Wikileaks Cable 09NAIROBI1798, 25 August 2009, §5.

<sup>58</sup>*Somalia Security Sector Assessment* (January 2010) §16a9b10.

<sup>59</sup>*Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1916 (2010)* (S/2011/433, 18 July 2011), §133. See also Wikileaks Cable 09NAIROBI1520, 15 July 2009, §7.

<sup>60</sup>Wikileaks Cable 09NAIROBI1370, 2 July 2009, §6.

<sup>61</sup>*SEMG Report*, 18 July 2011, §135.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid*, Annex 5.1, 231.

<sup>63</sup>UNSOM and World Bank, *Somalia Security*, 104 and x.

<sup>64</sup>Communication, US official, 10 January 2018.

### *Insufficient focus on institutions*

A second political problem was trying to build a national army without dedicating enough effort and resources to develop the relevant institutions and policy frameworks. As a result, the focus often became killing particular targets rather than building sustainable and effective institutions.<sup>65</sup> But institutions are crucial for an effective army, not least to develop its strategic vision and force structure, assign its tasks, ensure sustainable procurement and logistics support, as well as educate, manage and care for its personnel (and their dependents). Until April 2017, however, Somalia lacked the basic building blocks of a national security architecture let alone policy or operational frameworks into which to plug the various international SFA programmes. Instead of joined-up efforts to develop a security architecture, national security strategy, military doctrine, and educational and procurement institutions to support newly recruited soldiers, the various 'train and equip' efforts were left to fester in an institutional vacuum. To give one example, the very limited human resources capacity in the Somali Ministry of Defence—which by mid-2017 had only about 60 civilian personnel, including support staff—made it difficult to absorb and coordinate the assistance received let alone manage a national army. Consequently, even when specific SNA troops and units were trained and equipped there was no institutional infrastructure to manage them, assign them appropriate tasks, or get them operating in the field. In sum, 'train and equip' initiatives alone could not generate an effective army in the absence of such institutions.

### *Uncoordinated partners*

The third key political problem was the lack of coordination between the SNA's external partners. Ideally, multiple SFA providers would follow similar (or at least compatible) political objectives and military doctrine, deliver interoperable equipment and training on maintaining donated equipment, use standardised training programmes, and base them on an assessment of the SNA's needs. Indeed, faced with a plethora of external initiatives, in 2012, the new Federal Government asked partners to organise a single 'door to knock on' to coordinate activities in the security sector.<sup>66</sup> In reality, however, the SNA received uncoordinated external support for more than a decade.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup>See Reno, 'The Politics', 500.

<sup>66</sup>'Letter dated 19 April 2013 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council' (S/2013/239, 19 April 2013) Annex §43.

<sup>67</sup>See, for example, the similar conclusions reached in *Somalia Security Sector Assessment* (January 2010); AU, *Report on TFG* (November 2011); *Security Sector Assessment* (June 2011); and *Brief Report* (October 2011).

Most SFA was provided in ways that aligned with the partner's own vision and strategic interests. Some Somalis even saw this as a deliberate attempt to fragment their fledgling security sector and noted how clandestine military operations run by Ethiopia, Kenya and the United States—sometimes involving Somali actors—all complicated the issue.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, without Somalia's political elites agreeing on a shared vision for their national security architecture and forces, SFA providers had no stable framework into which to plug their assistance.<sup>69</sup>

Even when partner agendas converged around similar broad objectives they were rarely well coordinated. Or rather, select groups of donors managed some coordination, notably the US, UK and EU, but other states including the UAE, Ethiopia, Kenya and to a lesser extent, Turkey, would conduct their own disconnected projects. In mid-2016, the 'S6' group was formed to bring the external SFA initiatives of Turkey, the UAE, EU, UN, US and UK into line. But it had limited success and was quietly abandoned the following year and replaced by the Comprehensive Approach to Security, which encouraged partners to adopt an agreed division of labour across the five strands of (1) enabling effective AMISOM operations; (2) developing Somalia's national security institutions; (3) stabilisation efforts; (4) countering and preventing violent extremism; and (5) establishing an effective coordination mechanism.<sup>70</sup>

Take training programmes as one example of poor coordination. Since 2009, they were provided in several different languages, including English, French, Swahili, Amharic and Arabic, leaving Somali trainees with diverse military skills and doctrines only to find another form of military training skills and doctrine back home.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, partners did not keep track of many of their trainees, which led to wide-ranging numbers up to some 100,000 soldiers having received training, some of them probably many times over.<sup>72</sup> During the late 2000s, one expert concluded that 'most of the units that were trained defected.'<sup>73</sup> Even by 2013, the principal training facility in Mogadishu—Jazeera camp—lacked adequate billets, sanitation, and manoeuvre space for exercises, apparently causing some recruits to leave.<sup>74</sup> More fundamentally, training alone was not sufficient to build an

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<sup>68</sup>Interview, FGS official, Djibouti, 27 February 2016.

<sup>69</sup>*Security Sector Assessment* (June 2011), 33.

<sup>70</sup>As set out in the London Somalia Conference Security Pact, 11 May 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/london-somalia-conference-2017-security-pact>.

<sup>71</sup>*Brief Report* (October 2011).

<sup>72</sup>Telephone interview, UN Official, 7 September 2017.

<sup>73</sup>Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia* (London: Hurst 2013), 96.

<sup>74</sup>Roger Carstens, 'Analog War: How to rid Somalia of al-Shabab once and for all – in six (not-so) easy steps', *Foreign Policy.com*, 7 October 2013. The Jazeera Training Centre, located southwest of the Mogadishu International Airport, had trained Somali troops since at least 2010. By 2012, there were 45 instructors from Burundi, Kenya and Uganda, 25 Somali instructors, and supplementary staff from the AMISOM force headquarters.

effective army. As the 2009 Somali security sector assessment suggested, it 'may even be counterproductive if it is not followed up by a sustainable equipment/supply program and payment of salaries. If these requirements are not met, the risk of desertion/defection of trainees upon return to Somalia is high.'<sup>75</sup> In this sense, Matt Bryden was correct to argue that paying salaries was ultimately 'much more important in building a professional force than obtaining new weapons and equipment.'<sup>76</sup> The 2015 *Guulwade* Plan sought to address some of these problems by coordinating the assistance packages that its forces received around the new FGS training plan, which involved establishing sector and combined training centres, mentors, and a schedule for training priorities for the SNA.<sup>77</sup> From 2015, the US-led Military Coordination Cell in Somalia did enable better coordination at the technical and operational level but it was not until early 2017 that the Joint Training Symposium of partners made an important political breakthrough and adopted a Somali-owned training programme based on NATO standards.<sup>78</sup>

## Contextual challenges

Somalia's recent history and cultural dynamics also stymied international attempts to build an effective SNA in two major respects: first, the unhelpful legacies of two decades of state collapse, and second the multiple challenges raised by the country's clan politics.

## Legacies of state collapse

Between 1991 and 2000 Somalia had no central government, and from 2000 to 2012 its transitional governments commanded little loyalty and controlled little territory beyond parts of Mogadishu. This extended period of state collapse led most locals to find alternative security providers. Ken Menkhaus famously described a situation of 'governance without government,' whereby various non-state actors and informal systems of adaptation delivered services 'in the prolonged absence of a central government.'<sup>79</sup> Once international efforts started to resurrect a Somali federal government through the TNG and TFG in the 2000s, this produced a hybrid political order in which official governing institutions had to compete or negotiate for authority with other non-state entities to play the role of key security

<sup>75</sup> *Somalia Security Sector Assessment* (January 2010), §16a9b8j.

<sup>76</sup> IRIN, 'Somali Security'.

<sup>77</sup> *Guulwade Plan*, 5.

<sup>78</sup> SNA presentation to AMISOM Joint Review team, Mogadishu, 23 May 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Ken Menkhaus, 'Governance without Government in Somalia', *International Security* 31/3 (2006/07), 74.



provider. More often than not, it was clan militias that protected local populations across most of the country.<sup>80</sup>

This political context generated several symptoms that made it extremely difficult to build an effective SNA. First, it was tough to build a national army while simultaneously trying to re-establish a federal government. Until September 2012, Somalia had only transitional national authorities, which as noted above controlled very little territory and provided almost zero public services. Between 2013 and 2017, the often conflict-inducing process of establishing the new IRAs across south-central Somalia increased tensions, especially when external partners attempted to support regional forces beyond the Federal Government's control.<sup>81</sup> This stemmed from the lack of reconciliation that had taken place between these actors since the end of the civil war in 1991.<sup>82</sup>

The second, related problem was the widespread and deep distrust among many Somalis beyond the Banadir region that the Federal Government would be an impartial actor or could deliver genuine security. This bred a strong inclination towards continued reliance on non-state actors by both regional administrations and many ordinary Somalis, which in turn made it difficult to attract sufficient numbers of recruits to the SNA. Indeed, for those actors that saw a strong federal government as a potential threat, the idea of giving it an effective army was a recipe for disaster and marginalising other groups.

Third, this situation generated strong loyalties to actors beyond the Federal Government, which complicated any attempt to forge a unified and coherent command and control system throughout the SNA.

Fourth, prolonged state collapse meant that when the Federal Government did establish new institutions they were dysfunctional and hence sometimes simply reaffirmed people's suspicions of government incompetence and the need for alternatives. To take one example, without sustainable revenue it would be impossible to build an effective SNA. Yet Somalia had completely dysfunctional financial institutions such as revenue authorities, customs and the Central Bank. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of Somalis did not pay taxes, which produced very limited government revenues, much of which was embezzled because of elite corruption. Since the Central Bank did not perform its fiduciary responsibilities international agencies had to rely on Xawala or the PricewaterhouseCoopers mechanism and could not stop many illicit financial transactions involving

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<sup>80</sup>*Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1724 (2006) (S/2007/436, 18 July 2007) 11.*

<sup>81</sup>Between 2013 and 2016, four IRAs were established across south-central Somalia: Jubbaland, Southwest Somalia, Hirshabelle and Galmudug, each of which sought to develop their own regional forces not all of which were integrated into the SNA.

<sup>82</sup>See, for example, Tobias Hagmann, *Stabilization, Extraversion and Political Settlements in Somalia* (Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2016).

unregistered private and even foreign governments.<sup>83</sup> In such circumstances there was little prospect of generating sustainable revenues let alone establishing a workable procurement system for a military.

A fifth legacy problem was the long period without a functioning military system. Combined with Somalia's youthful population, this left many young potential SNA recruits confused about the meaning of a federal state and how it was supposed to function.<sup>84</sup> It also left behind a missing generation of officers available to the armed forces. As one senior TFG commander put it in 2011, 'the most critical gap in the existing forces was the lack of young officers and junior officers. Most officers are old: "less than 50" are younger. The older officers find it difficult to lead the young soldiers, physically and mentally.'<sup>85</sup> Poor education and literacy levels were also a problem that made some military speciality categories difficult to populate.<sup>86</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that before the IRAs were established between 2013 and 2016, there was no political entity at the sub-federal level that had official legitimacy to discuss the politics of national security. It was only after the creation of these entities that legitimate answers to the questions of security governance could be provided. Before that, it had been a Mogadishu-focused process, which fuelled critics in the regions.

### Clan politics

Although Somalia's political elites do not automatically make decisions based on their clan identity, clan politics cast a large shadow over the country's security sector and significantly complicated the goal of building an effective *national* army. In his careful study of the Somali Armed Forces, Colin Robinson concluded 'Clan loyalties exceeding loyalties to the center is the principal obstacle to rebuilding an effective national army for Somalia.'<sup>87</sup> 'Clan ties', he argued, 'trump virtually everything, business interests sometimes excluded.'<sup>88</sup>

The roots of major clan divisions and agendas rupturing the SNA can be traced back to Siad Barre's efforts to consolidate his rule during the 1980s.<sup>89</sup> This came after an aborted coup in 1978, when Barre responded by loading

<sup>83</sup>Security Sector Assessment (June 2011), 30–31.

<sup>84</sup>Brief Report (October 2011).

<sup>85</sup>Cited in Robinson, 'Revisiting', 246.

<sup>86</sup>Paul R. Camacho and Ibrahim Mohamed Abukar, *Somalia's Security: The Reconstruction of the Somali National Army* (Mogadishu: Center for Policy Analysis and Research February 2017), 8. See also Mubarak, 'Somali Military'.

<sup>87</sup>Robinson, 'Revisiting', 245. A similar point is made by Camacho and Abukar, *Somalia's Security*, 7.

<sup>88</sup>Robinson, 'Revisiting', 246. On the importance of business interests, see Aisha Ahmad, 'The Security Bazaar: Business interests and Islamist power in civil war Somalia', *International Security* 39/3 (2014/15), 89–117.

<sup>89</sup>Before 1976, the armed forces sought a balance between the major clans, even specifying the proportional number of recruits from each district. See Robinson, 'Revisiting'.

the armed forces with his Marehan and related Darod officers. Clan dynamics undermined the SNA ever since. With the implosion of the central government in 1991 clan dynamics became even more important as most individuals turned to their clans, sub-clans or sub-sub clans to provide for their security.

By the time of the first TFG administration, the struggle over Mogadishu was interpreted by many Somalis as primarily a conflict involving a Darod-led TFG trying to re-assert Darod dominance over a primarily Hawiye city. Following the selection of the second TFG administration in January 2009, the Hawiye/Abgaal and Hawiye/Habir Gedir/Ayr increased their power over the military sphere around Mogadishu.<sup>90</sup>

Clan politics also caused problems as AMISOM and the TFG forces moved beyond Mogadishu from late 2011. With al-Shabaab retaining control of much of south-central Somalia, this left relatively few areas from which the SNA could recruit new soldiers. Specifically, the Banadir region around Mogadishu was dominated by particular clans and sub-clans, which were then directly reflected in the composition of new recruits entering the army. One internal AMISOM analysis concluded that the 'monster of clan' infected the whole enterprise. 'Clan identity within the forces,' the AU noted, 'is the stumbling block to all efforts in organizing a national military force.'<sup>91</sup> The practical consequence of the preponderance of certain clans was that the ostensibly 'national' army was perceived by most citizens outside Mogadishu as a partisan force dominated by particular sub-clans. When those forces operated outside their areas of influence, such as Lower Shabelle, locals viewed them with suspicion.

Clan politics also had debilitating effects on achieving a unified command and control structure within the SNA both because rank-and-file troops often displayed loyalty to clan (and other actors, including previous warlords) rather than the federal government, and because sometimes clan politics complicated relationships between some senior Ministry of Defence personnel and the SNA. With most SNA battalions and brigades largely organised around clan lines, this reduced formal interaction and collaboration between them. In some cases, clan conflicts stopped collaboration between battalions within the same brigade.<sup>92</sup> As a 2015 UNSOM report observed, the subsequent dynamic within the units saw most of them revolve around one strong leader with senior personnel from the same clan; if company and platoon commanders were not of the same clan, however, command authority quickly broke down.<sup>93</sup> Most of these commanders had little formal training but considerable militia experience. This is

<sup>90</sup>Leaked SEMG letter, S/AC.29/2014/COMM.13 (OC.8), 6 February 2014, 5 cited in UNSOM, *The SNA*, 15.

<sup>91</sup>AU, *Report on TFG* (November 2011), 9 and 1.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid, 6.

<sup>93</sup>UNSOM, *The SNA*, 6.

why some experts concluded that the importance of sub-clan dynamics dictated that painstaking local-level negotiations were required to find command solutions.<sup>94</sup>

Clan dynamics also complicated the payment of salaries for SNA troops. Not only have clan leaders that provided fighters to serve in the SNA demanded kickbacks on the soldiers' pay but clan favoritism within the SNA has meant troops outside of Mogadishu and Middle and Lower Shabelle regions have received little if any salary support.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, clan politics undermined the potential for the new SNA to act as a unifying symbol for Somalia. Multiclan SNA units were potentially important symbols of national unity.<sup>96</sup> But they also represented a threat to the existing clan influence within Somalia's security sector. As a consequence, they existed in only a couple of SNA brigades and the *Danab* advanced infantry battalion, and only in the latter case were recruits consistently selected on merit across clan. An SNA largely segregated along clan lines could not act as much of a unifying force.

## Operational challenges

The main operational challenges involved building an army while simultaneously fighting a war against a deadly and adaptable opponent, the complexities of military integration in a country with so many armed groups, and the huge capability gaps afflicting the SNA.

## Reforming while fighting

Most SSR programmes take place after a war or during the process of forging a political settlement. In Somalia, however, building the SNA occurred during wartime, in the absence of a peace process, and until very recently, without an agreed national security architecture, strategy and force structure. As the UN's senior military advisor in Somalia acknowledged in May 2013, this produced 'a real tension trying to train these [SNA] forces when they are at war' because 'no one has the luxury of pulling them out; they are essential in the fight against Al-Shabab'.<sup>97</sup> This raised questions about how applicable standard SSR guidelines and principles were for Somalia. US guidelines for

<sup>94</sup>Matt Bryden and Jeremy Brickhill, 'Disarming Somalia: Lessons in Stabilisation from a Collapsed State', *Conflict, Security & Development* 10/2 (2010), 239–62.

<sup>95</sup>*Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2244 (2015): Somalia* (S/2016/919, 31 October 2016) Annex 2.2, §8.

<sup>96</sup>On the important symbolic roles of national armies in the unifying war-torn territories see Roy Licklider, 'Introduction', in Roy Licklider (ed.), *New Armies from Old* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press 2014).

<sup>97</sup>'Somali Security Sector Reform', *IRIN*, 13 May 2013, <http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2013/05/13/somali-security-sector-reform>.

successful SSR, for instance, emphasise that implementing it during political instability and without national consensus on the vision and structures guiding the sector is a recipe for failure.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, Somalia lacked most of the ‘fundamental core elements’ identified by the AU for promoting SSR.<sup>99</sup> Some analysts therefore warned that SFA in Somalia would be vulnerable to high waste and potentially counterproductive.<sup>100</sup>

But there were few options: the SNA had to be built while it was fighting. The initial plan was to take the fight to al-Shabaab, win the war and then international partners could focus on professionalising the Somali security forces. A rough but uncoordinated division of labour emerged. The US focused on building the *Danab* battalion while Ethiopia concentrated on the Gedo, Bakool and Hiraan regions, Kenya operated in the Jubba regions, whereas Turkey, the UAE and EU remained in Mogadishu.

Other operational challenges emerged as well. During 2009 when AMISOM and the TFG fought against al-Shabaab over parts of Mogadishu, the lack of even basic equipment such as uniforms left AMISOM commanders concerned about potential problems in distinguishing non-uniformed TFG troops and allied militias during combat. Other deficiencies led TFG commanders to worry that even when they captured new territory their ‘front line’ troops were not always committed to hold it.<sup>101</sup> In mid-2011, at the height of the battle for Mogadishu, the lack of basic communications equipment and skills on the Somali side meant that there was only ‘limited coordination’ between AMISOM and Somali forces, which made ‘it difficult to conduct joint planning and operations to contain insurgent groups fighting against the TFG.’<sup>102</sup>

To make matters more difficult, Somalia was what one contractor working with the SNA called a ‘distributed battlefield,’ that is, a large territory with few troops.<sup>103</sup> In such terrain, emphasis should be placed on small battalions (rather than brigades) as the focal point of the army and success rested on the ability to operate with ‘small unit tactics, mobile strike teams, civil affairs, and simplified logistics.’ But these were tools that would take time, resources and training to master, none of which were available to the SNA at the time.

### *Problems of military integration*

Another practical problem was whether and how to build the new SNA through an official process of military integration—the process of bringing individuals ‘into the new military in positions similar to the ones they

<sup>98</sup>US, *Security Sector Reform* (US AID, Department of Defense, Department of State, February 2009), <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/115810.pdf>.

<sup>99</sup>See *Policy Framework on Security Sector Reform* (Addis Ababa: AU 2013) Section D.

<sup>100</sup>UNSON, *The SNA*, 21; author’s communication, Colin Robinson, 6 August 2017.

<sup>101</sup>Wikileaks Cable 09NAIROBI1962, 18 September 2009, §2.

<sup>102</sup>*Security Sector Assessment* (June 2011), 6.

<sup>103</sup>Carstens, ‘Analog War’.

occupied in prior organizations'.<sup>104</sup> In Somalia, SFA providers confronted a hybrid political order that resembled what Alice Hills called a 'security arena,' in which a multitude of armed groups competed for dominance, rather than an institutionalised 'security sector'.<sup>105</sup> In this environment, some degree of military integration was necessary for building a national army. And as discussed above, since 2008 the SNA was cobbled together out of various clan forces, former Islamic Courts militias and subsequent rebels, old SNA 'grey soldiers,' and other ostensibly government-aligned groups of fighters.

Sometimes this was done formally as a way to build greater political unity among armed factions, as in the Djibouti Agreement (2008). But on most other occasions it happened by default or to appease particular leaders who retained personal command of 'their' fighters and were bought into the SNA fold.

In this sense, military integration wasn't just a peacebuilding strategy; it was also a potential means to wage war more effectively against al-Shabaab and provide an exit strategy for AMISOM. But it came with some considerable risks, not least of rogue commanders, al-Shabaab infiltration, and the absence of an overarching peace process to define which actors to integrate and on what terms. Hence the SNA remained a messy amalgamation of multiple armed groups with a distinct lack of unified command and control. The problems of integration intensified further from 2013 with the process of establishing Somalia's Interim Regional Administrations and when their subsequent, largely clan-based regional forces assumed a more important status. This presented a dilemma of whether to support their continued existence outside of the SNA structure in the hope they would help degrade al-Shabaab or try and officially integrate them into the SNA chain of command and dilute their clan affiliations. An operational readiness assessment of Somalia's regional forces was supposed to be completed by the end of 2018 but remains incomplete.

Military integration was thus a deeply political process in Somalia, which no amount of technical SFA could resolve. In particular, either for clan-related or political reasons many of the armed groups beyond Mogadishu distrusted attempts to centralise control of the Somali armed forces. As one scholar correctly summarised, military integration 'is, first and foremost, a local *political* problem, not a matter of *technical* expertise that local actors lack and whose secrets international actors must therefore impart'.<sup>106</sup> And as analysed above, the interest asymmetry, the lack of reconciliation between major armed groups, and the absence of a national security architecture

<sup>104</sup>Licklider, 'Introduction', 3.

<sup>105</sup>Alice Hills, 'Security Sector or Security Arena? The Evidence from Somalia', *International Peacekeeping* 21/2 (2014), 165–80. In 2016, ACLED identified 150 distinct armed groups in Somalia. See <https://www.acleddata.com/dashboard/#706>.

<sup>106</sup>Ronald Krebs, 'So What?', in Licklider (ed.), *New Armies from Old*, 255.

until April 2017 meant that the politics of Somalia's military integration process remained uncondusive to building an effective national army.

### *Capability gaps*

The final key operational challenge was the SNA's daunting list of capability gaps. As one recent independent study concluded, 'The list of needs is so fundamental that it is no exaggeration to suggest that Somalia is building its army from the very foundation.'<sup>107</sup> Even when launching its *Gulwade* Plan in 2015, the Federal Government acknowledged a long list of technical and infrastructural shortages afflicting the SNA.<sup>108</sup> The principal operational gaps were mobility, especially armoured vehicles but also 'technicals,' pickups, troop-carrying trucks, and specialist vehicles such as ambulances, water trucks, fuel bowzers, and recovery vehicles; all types of ammunition<sup>109</sup>; heavy weapons and the ability to maintain and repair them<sup>110</sup>; communications equipment, including military radios<sup>111</sup>; and field defences, especially force protection for defended positions and forward operating bases. There were also very limited counter-IED capabilities, which was reflected in the fact that between 2015 and 2017 the SNA suffered nearly twice as many fatalities from IED attacks as AMISOM.<sup>112</sup> The lack of small arms and light weapons is particularly interesting given the corruption discussed above. According to the UN Monitoring Group's 2015 report, following the partial lifting of the UN arms embargo in 2013 the Somali government received over 17,500 weapons.<sup>113</sup> And yet the 2017 Operational Readiness Assessment of the SNA revealed that only 70% of troops possessed any weapons and only an average of 195 service rifles in each battalion.

The SNA also still had major shortages and problems related to training, logistics capacity, vehicle maintenance facilities, arms and ammunition storage facilities, medical support (especially facilities and resources to treat and stabilise patients forward in the sectors),<sup>114</sup> and adequate barracks to accommodate and maintain good control over its troops. The combined effect of these gaps was not only to reduce military effectiveness but also to undermine morale.

<sup>107</sup>Camacho and Abukar, *Somalia's Security*, 11.

<sup>108</sup>*Gulwade Plan*, 2–8. Similarly long lists of equipment and infrastructural shortages can be found in *Security Sector Assessment* (June 2011) and *Brief Report* (October 2011).

<sup>109</sup>Although note that the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia concluded the SNA should have received almost 9 million rounds of ammunition. *Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2182 (2014): Somalia* (S/2015/801, 19 October 2015), §136.

<sup>110</sup>In 2011, AMISOM estimated that 80% of SNA weapons belonged to warlords, clans and individuals rather than the Federal Government. AU, *Report on TFG* (November 2011), 7–8.

<sup>111</sup>For years, the TFG troops had to rely on commercial mobile phone networks for communications or walkie-talkie handsets. *Somalia Security Sector Assessment* (January 2010), §4ag and *Brief Report* (October 2011).

<sup>112</sup>Interview, UNMAS official, Mogadishu, 24 June 2018.

<sup>113</sup>*SEMG Report*, 19 October 2015, §136.

<sup>114</sup>By late 2011, the Martini Hospital in Mogadishu was the SNA's only medical facility. It had a 20-bed capacity, one volunteer doctor and about 12 nurses. AU, *Report on TFG* (November 2011), 5.

It will suffice to end by briefly noting that the SNA lacked arguably the most basic capability an army should possess: the ability to identify its personnel and stop desertion. Even today, however, the SNA is not able to stop its soldiers deserting or absconding.<sup>115</sup> The reasons varied: some left because their real loyalty lay elsewhere, for others it was lack of regular pay, food or other poor conditions of service. But the problem was compounded by the lack of a comprehensive biometric identification system, which is still not complete. Instead, the FGS, the US and UK, and the UAE all held SNA identification registries but none were fully comprehensive nor were they aligned.<sup>116</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, the SNA suffered from ghost soldiers on its roll and stipends going to people who were dead, permanently injured, old persons, women partners, orphans, and disabled.<sup>117</sup> Some SNA personnel and their political masters used this state of confusion to engage in corruption and fraud; al-Shabaab exploited it in order to infiltrate the SNA to prosecute attacks on government installations and personnel.

## Conclusion

Without an effective Somali army, little military pressure could be put on al-Shabaab and AMISOM's exit strategy was effectively stalled. Yet considerable time, money and effort by over a dozen international partners failed to build such a force. The explanation for this failure lies in three interrelated sets of political, contextual and operational challenges. Numerous unhelpful legacies of two decades of state collapse and the complexities of Somalia's clan dynamics certainly represented an almost uniquely difficult context in which to try and build an effective national army. But with sufficient political will and unity of purpose among Somali leaders and international partners these constraints need not have guaranteed failure. However, key Somali elites lacked the requisite political will to build professional, national security forces. This interest asymmetry between the main priorities of international partners and the Somali authorities badly undermined attempts to build an effective SNA. The inability to deal with pervasive corruption and forge a consensus among Somalia's political elites around a shared vision of the national security architecture, how to finance it, its decision-making mechanisms, and how best to prioritise the fight against al-Shabaab, left both AMISOM and international partners with an impossible task. Specifically, it stymied the establishment of the kinds of security institutions that a national army needs to function and left international partners without a settled framework into which to plug their SFA. The result was various partner projects trying to build an army in separate pieces. Nevertheless, Somalia's

<sup>115</sup>For a list of SNA withdrawals and salary-related incidents between September 2015 and August 2016, see *SEMG Report*, 31 October 2016, Annex 2.6.

<sup>116</sup>FGS/DFID, *Securing Payroll*, 41. See also *SEMG Report*, 31 October 2016, Annex 2.3.

<sup>117</sup>AU, *Report on TFG* (November 2011), 8.



partners could have done a much better job of coordinating their disparate SFA programmes. To make matters worse, even if the political context had been more conducive to building such institutions, the SNA had to be built almost from scratch while simultaneously fighting a war against a deadly, adaptable and knowledgeable foe. And here the SNA suffered from almost every conceivable technical and institutional capability gap from weapons to vehicles, barracks to medical support and identification systems to salaries.

The current national security architecture endorsed in the London Security Pact (May 2017) and the Somali Transition Plan (drafted in March 2018) provide the best framework thus far on which to forge the necessary political consensus. But their implementation will require genuine buy-in from Somalia's regional authorities and political leaders. They must be willing to confront the spoilers within the country's political establishment who wish to scupper the development of professional national security forces. This requires Somalia's leaders to take those difficult political decisions about governance and financing as soon as possible.

Achieving such buy-in will require a fundamental change of attitude and behaviour by Somalia's leaders, which is unlikely. One attempt to encourage such a change is to impose more conditions on SFA. In December 2017, the United States adopted this approach when it cited concerns about corruption and suspended its stipends and other forms of security assistance to SNA units, with the exception of *Danab* and the presidential guard. To restart US assistance, Somali leaders must stem corruption and deliver on their promises to implement the details of the new national security architecture. Another way to encourage greater buy-in is to improve international coordination by adopting the lead-nation model of SSR. This was used to good effect in Sierra Leone where the British-led International Military Assistance Training Team forged a new and effective army.<sup>118</sup> Neither approach is guaranteed to work, however. If elite buy-in proves elusive, armed forces across Somalia will remain fragmented and multiple external actors will likely continue to build separate, localised, probably clan-based forces (with *Danab* as the multiclan and meritocratic exception). At best, such a balkanised approach might reduce the al-Shabaab threat in particular areas but it will not produce a professional national army or sustainable national security institutions any time soon.

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<sup>118</sup>See Peter Albrecht and Paul Jackson, *Securing Sierra Leone, 1997–2013* (London: Routledge 2015).

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